DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 234 CE 076 123

TITLE	Identification, Validation and Accreditation of Prior and Informal Learning. United Kingdom Report. National Report. CEDEFOP Panorama.
INSTITUTION	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Thessaloniki (Greece).
ISBN	ISBN-92-828-2526-4
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	53p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Bernan Associates, 4611-F Assembly Drive, Lanham, MD 20706-4391; toll-free phone: 800-274-4447; e-mail: query@bernan.com; world wide web: http://www.bernan.com (catalogue no. HX-11-97-051-EN-C).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Education; Adult Education; Adult Learning; Adult Students; Educational Practices; Educational Trends; Equivalency Tests; *Evaluation Methods; Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Literature Reviews; *Nonformal Education; *Prior Learning; *Student Certification; *Student Evaluation; Trend Analysis; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	National Record of Achievement (United Kingdom); National Vocational Qualifications (England); Scottish Vocational Qualifications; *United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Current practice in accreditation of prior and informal learning in the United Kingdom was examined through a review of literature on how the accreditation of prior and informal learning is being used to gain access to higher education or toward certification of a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) or Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ). Special attention was paid to the following: use of assessment of prior learning (APL) in unpaid work; views of United Kingdom organizations on APL; the National Record of Achievement; access and higher education; success of APL and assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) in higher education; and success of APL in NVQs and SVQs. It was discovered that accrediting and awarding bodies for NVQs and SVQs are increasingly encouraging assessors to acknowledge evidence of prior learning and achievement as part of the overall package of evidence that a candidate may bring to the assessment of NVQs and SVQs. With higher education, APL appears more accepted than APEL, with many institutions having a more straightforward process for awarding credit for certificated learning than for experiential learning and with many institutions having different fee structures for APL and APEL. Many institutions are taking a fresh look at both APL and APEL. (Contains 17 references.) (MN)

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ED 418 234

Identification validation and accreditation of prior and informal learning

United Kingdom report

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National report

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Identification, validation and accreditation of prior and informal learning
United Kingdom report
CEDEFOP project undertaken by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
April to July 1997

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Thessaloniki 1997

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The Centre was established by Regulation (EEC) No 337/75 of the Council of the European Communities, last amended by Council Regulation (EC) No 251/95 of 6 February 1995 and Council Regulation (EC) No 354/95 of 20 February 1995.

National report

A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet.
It can be accessed through the Europa server (http://europa.eu.int).

Cataloguing data can be found at the end of this publication.

Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1998

ISBN 92-828-2526-4

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Printed in Luxembourg

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) would like to acknowledge the contributions of the following organisations in providing information for this report:

Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)
City and Guilds, London
RSA Examinations Board
ED EXCEL
The Open University
National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ)

PREFACE

This report, focusing on the United Kingdom, is one of several contributions to the CEDEFOP project on assessment of prior and non-formal learning. The project was started in 1997, and will be concluded in 1998. The purpose of the project is to provide a comprehensive overview of the development in this area within the European Union (and the EEA countries).

Two strategies will be followed in order to create this overview. First, a series of country-specific reports, of which the report on the UK is an example, will describe and discuss the situation on a national level. Second, a series of general reports, based on comparisons between countries as well as theoretically-based studies will be published throughout the project period. This combination of national, comparative and theoretical studies is necessary in order to understand the growing attention, on an international level, given to learning which takes place outside formal training and education.

In most cases, the methods and systems aiming at the assessment of non-formal skills has been operational for a comparatively short period of time. In some countries, no permanent methodologies and systems have been established, thus opening up the possibility of a variety of solutions in the years to come. This is very much the case on the European Union level, where the idea of a European Personal Skills Card was introduced in the White Paper on "Teaching and Learning" (1995). We hope that the conclusions from the different reports will be of some relevance both to the European and to the national debates on the topic. In order to ensure this relevance, all contributors to the project have been asked to focus on the following questions:

1) To what degree can methodologies for the assessment of non-formal learning be ascertained as valid and reliable? In other words, do they measure what they are supposed to measure, and is the quality of the assessment approach sufficient?
2) To what extent are assessments accepted - by individuals, by enterprises and by the labour market? In other words, what type of a legitimate basis are current (and future) systems "resting" on?

By asking these questions we are attempting to stimulate research and debate on the effects of current initiatives, advancing from theoretical assumptions on the potential of methodologies and systems, to a factual comprehension of the problems and principles being challenged.

Jens Bjørnåvold Thessaloniki, November 1997

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the report

The purpose of this report is to provide CEDEFOP with a snap shot of current practice in the accreditation of prior and informal learning in the United Kingdom. It will explore the extent to which the process of recognition of prior and informal learning is used in vocational education and training (VET) and provides a means of access to Higher Education institutions (HEIs), particularly for adult returners to education.

The report will seek to identify the views of key players in vocational education and training on the accreditation of prior learning. This information will in part be referred to within existing publications and is supported by data collected by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) from telephone interviews with representatives of these key organisations. The report will highlight where existing publications have included case studies of best practice in the use of accreditation of prior and informal learning.

There are five publications in particular which have been referred to in some detail for this report, mainly because the publications are current and provide data on how the accreditation of prior and informal learning is being used to gain access to Higher Education or towards certification of a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) or Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ).

A bibliography will be provided listing all the material referred to during the course of the project.

Definition of current practice

The initial issue is to determine what constitutes *current* practice. Most recent publications acknowledge that since a flurry of activity around 1991, the accreditation of prior and informal learning has enjoyed mixed fortunes. This is because the process has either become absorbed into a wider assessment of skills, experience and knowledge or is given stand-alone status which may have the advantage of making the process of recognition easier to identify.

This report draws on information from around 1991-1992 onwards as this allows SQA to update CEDEFOP on activities since the introduction of high profile initiatives in the UK such as *Access to Assessment*.

The concept of APL

APL in the UK was influenced by North American work - particularly the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). There were two main strands from this influence:

- work influenced by Norman Evans and the Learning from Experience Trust. This has been described in the main as Assessment or Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). The developments are documented in Norman Evans (1992). The emphasis was on learning through experience using the development of a portfolio as a reflection on that learning. There was an interest in how the process could assist access to Higher Education and encourage adults into learning as well as being a programme of learning in its own right. The certification of learning was also included-assessment of prior learning (APL). This was linked into academic credit towards degrees, continuing professional development (CPD) and into the Vocational Qualifications established through NCVQ and SCOTVEC.

- work more closely linked to government developments influenced by Susan Simosko establishing accreditation or prior learning within training and education establishment focusing on certification as the main outcome. This followed on with the Access to Assessment Initiative over a 3 year period which looked at Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and Local Enterprise Companies (LECs) embedding the accreditation of prior learning into NVQ/SVQ programmes. This was seen as one of the components in taking forward the competence-based education and training system, particularly in the NVQ and SVQ contexts.

The essence of both strands of work was to establish the concept and principles of recognition of prior learning within the Qualification frameworks of occupational NVQs and SVQs and other vocational qualifications, as well as into the credit systems and admission policies for Higher Education.

Whatever has happened since is likely to have had its roots in the initial work of these two strands.

The key components of this work emerge:

the processes

- establishing goals and an entry point into some development
- reflection on experience and linking learning to established outcomes or criteria
- documenting learning and activities as part of ongoing learning process
- collecting evidence (often by means of building a portfolio)
- matching evidence to standards

and then the results:

- credit within a programme or course leading to a qualification
- certification of competence
- tailored learning programme for learning needs agreed as a result of the process.

The process was encompassing more than just the recognition of prior and informal learning - it was about learning and assessment in the broader sense and in particular how this might be tackled on a more individualised basis.

The use of a portfolio to collate evidence introduced another approach to gathering evidence which has become inbuilt to many APL approaches although this should be seen as a means to an end and not a required feature of APL.

PART I - APL IN PRACTICE

The use of APL in unpaid work

In 1995, the Learning Methods Branch of the Employment Department (now Department for Education and Employment) published a technical report on *Unpaid work in the home and its relationship to paid occupations and National Vocational Qualifications*.

The report followed on from an earlier piece of work titled *Unpaid work in the home: a functional analysis* also sponsored by the Employment Department which carried out a functional analysis of unpaid work.

The aim of these reports was to raise awareness amongst employers, providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and guidance services on the value of unpaid work and how such work can be recognised by the accreditation of competence.

In addition to the functional analysis, the reports included the findings of fifteen pilot projects on unpaid work and case studies on the accreditation of prior learning from employers, practitioners and awarding bodies of NVQs.

The projects were designed to cover amongst other issues, assessment and credit for voluntary workers and for isolated unpaid workers.

The methodology and field work for the report published in 1995 was developed by setting a number of objectives based on a predetermined schedule of competences or skills and to make comparisons between this and the competences and skills acquired in paid work. This mapping was carried out by experts in the field. The material was gathered using semi-structured interviews, workshops, and invitations to practitioners to comment on the mapping and case studies.

Two objectives focus on the accreditation of unpaid work and in the opinion of the consultants for the report, these require further field work to establish what the strategy and support issues will be in terms of recognition.

The second of two national conferences on unpaid work allowed the consultants to identify organisations which might be interested in implementing the accreditation of unpaid work, although no additional funding would be made available to help with this implementation. Of the 350 organisations represented as the conference, 40 responded to the invitation and of these, 18 participated in the project.

The consultants found that the notion of learning in unpaid work presented some challenges to users' perceptions. First of all, the consultants had to define the scope of unpaid work and ensure that practitioners understood the term to cover both the work of voluntary organisations - perhaps the most common understanding of unpaid work - and also work in the home.

The consultants identified a range of qualifications where informal learning gained in unpaid work could be recognised. Occupationally relevant NVQs were identified and then analysed unit by unit. The consultants listed about sixty NVQs which could be linked to the functional analysis of unpaid work in the home. These qualifications included:

- Management
- Accounting
- Business Administration (now known as Administration)
- a range of core skills, such as problem solving and communication
- Construction (level 1)

The consultants found that unpaid workers were able to meet most of the units identified in accordance with their situations. However, gaps in meeting the standards emerged in relation to knowledge and understanding and range which defines the different contexts in which candidates must demonstrate competence.

The report does stress that this does not mean unpaid workers are more able to meet the standards than paid workers. It is simply that unpaid workers fall into one of three categories:

- already competent and able to demonstrate competence from past or current activities carried out in the home

- carrying out unpaid work in the home which may create opportunities for evidence of competence to be generated

- competent or nearly competent but unable to provide suitable evidence and in need of further training to meet the standards

The home was judged to provide a wide range of opportunities to generate evidence and much positive feedback was gathered. The project did, however, experience some difficulties. For example, personnel acting on behalf of awarding bodies had limited training and development in unpaid work and this meant the acceptability or otherwise of evidence was subject to local variation. In addition, the issue of what constituted commercial pressures, such as production costs (often referred to in standards) allowed awarding body personnel to exclude evidence from the home.

During the course of the projects on unpaid work, the consultants gathered views from employers. This revealed that no employers had previously considered competences acquired in unpaid work for the purposes of recruitment, selection, training and development. A significant amount of time was spent explaining the concept and often the accreditation of unpaid work became bound up with the wider issue of NVQ implementation. At the time of writing the report, the consultants found that most of the employers were only just beginning to introduce NVQs, so knowledge of the qualifications and the accreditation of prior learning could not be assumed.

Three case studies and fifteen mini projects are described in Annex 3 of the report which includes a reference to outreach programmes for isolated unpaid workers. One such project secured funding from the local Training and Enterprise Company (TEC) through the *Access to Assessment Initiative* in an independent APL and guidance service to develop the accreditation of unpaid work.

The report on *Unpaid Work in the Home and its Relationship to Paid Occupations and National Vocational Qualifications* makes a number of recommendations on how to promote the accreditation of unpaid work. It concludes that NVQs are a useful medium to accredit competence gained in unpaid work. The consultants urge users to tackle the sense of underachievement experienced by unpaid workers and in this way, fractured career patterns and low self-esteem,often associated with expectations of low-achievement in employment, may be overcome.

The views of UK organisations on APL

The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ)[1] and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)[2] are the two accrediting bodies in the United Kingdom for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQs) respectively. Both organisations refer to Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) within guidance to Awarding Bodies.

Awarding bodies are responsible for making submissions for NVQs and SVQs to the accrediting bodies. Accrediting bodies look at the proposals through a process of accreditation and determine whether they meet criteria for quality assurance and assessment. Awarding bodies are required to seek accreditation prior to offering the qualifications through their centres.

This section looks at the views of the Accrediting Bodies, Awarding Bodies and Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) on the use of APL in NVQs and SVQs.

In recent years, various publications have been produced which reflect current practice in the accreditation of prior and informal learning. One report initiated by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) is particularly worth noting, given the extensive research carried out by the consultants and the findings which reflect a changing emphasis on the importance of APL since the introduction of the *Access to Assessment Initiative*.

The following section on the Department explores this report in some detail. Part II - Evaluation presents the findings and offers some quantitative information on the use of APL.

Following the section on DfEE, the project focuses on the views of the Accrediting Bodies and interviews with representatives of five Awarding Bodies which offer NVQs and/or SVQs. These views were gathered during the course of telephone interviews using structured questionnaires.

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[1] The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) will become the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in September 1997.

[2] The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) previously SCOTVEC (Scottish Vocational Education Council) and SEB (Scottish Examination Board) came into existence in April 1997.

We have decided to include the results of the telephone interviews at this stage in the project as the views reflect the findings listed in the DfEE report mentioned above.

1 The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)

Accrediting and awarding bodies provided information for a recent study commissioned by DfEE which aimed to investigate and identify obstacles to the take up of APL and make recommendations on how to improve the operation of APL.

The views expressed in the report are those of the consultants and do not necessarily reflect DfEE policy. The document is titled *Report commissioned by Department for Education and Employment on a study to improve the operation of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in the NVQ and SVQ system.*

Introduction

This study was carried out by a team of consultants to explore the ways in which the accreditation

of prior learning is operated in the NVQ and SVQ system. It commenced in November 1996 and
builds on a previous research project known as the *Access to Assessment Initiative*.

The research was carried out in a bid to address concerns about perceived obstacles to using APL in a climate where the number of adult returners to education and training is on the increase. The Department sought to identify these obstacles and to make recommendations on promoting the use of APL whilst ensuring the rigour of assessment is maintained.

The study was completed in March 1997 and the final document remains to be published by the Department. There is no sinister reason for this delay in publication; it is simply that the document makes various recommendations which could have policy and cost implications should they be adopted.

The aims

- to explore the current perception and reality of APL delivery including awarding body practices and documentation

- to examine the potential for flexibility and enhanced cost effectiveness in delivering APL including approaches which minimise paperwork

- to identify good practice for awarding bodies and centres including how the APL approach is presented to individuals

The Methodology

The research was divided into five stages:

- orientation

  Twelve interviews were conducted with key national agencies to discuss perceptions of APL and to identify any recommendations to improve its operation

- review of existing literature

  The process of gathering and reviewing material on APL was on-going and various agencies, including awarding bodies were contacted and asked to forward information to the consultants.

- research into APL activity amongst organisations implementing NVQs/SVQs

  A total of 53 interviews - face to face and telephone - were held with representatives from those organisations involved in some aspect of assessing NVQs/SVQs, including awarding bodies, TECs/LECs and lead bodies. The questions focused on the guidance which the organisations provided on APL and how they encouraged its use in implementing NVQs/SVQs.

  It became clear that lead bodies and had little or no information on APL or that information on APL was embedded in awarding bodies' literature, if provided.

This resulted in a higher number of case studies being included in the document than was originally intended.

- research into APL activity amongst organisations delivering NVQs/SVQs

  The qualifications are implemented and assessed by approved centres, each centre may be working with more than one awarding body.

  The consultants asked the awarding bodies if centres could be approached and asked to complete questionnaires about APL. Thirteen awarding bodies were asked to participate. Questionnaires were supplied to 279 centres and attempts were made to cover the full NVQ/SVQ framework. This was by and large achieved with the exception of engineering.

- research amongst end users of NVQ/SVQ services

  The consultants interviewed a total of 19 candidates from 5 centres. The candidates were aged between 25 and 50 years old and were undertaking a range of qualifications.

  During the course of the research with end users, the consultants conducted 54 telephone interviews . The interviews included employers from a range of businesses and explored issues such as awareness of APL, and reasons for not using APL as part of the assessment process.

The document contains a full listing of all organisations contacted during the course of the research.

The findings

The consultants highlighted a number of findings from this research:

i awareness, understanding and perceptions of APL
ii barriers to uptake
iii cost implications
iv implementation
v applicability of APL
vi quality assurance issues
vii improving the operation of APL

These finding are explored in more detail in Part II - Evaluation.

Relationship to previous research on APL

The consultants state that this study does not contradict previous research on the advantages and problems associated with the accreditation of prior learning. However, it does question the emphasis on evidence of prior learning at the expense of other evidence. This study purports that the type and source of evidence is irrelevant so long it can credit current competence - evidence of prior learning is only one potential source of evidence.

Early pilot studies concluded that APL could be applied cost effectively to vocational training and education and produced a model which is still current practice:

1. Pre-entry
↓
2. Initial screening
↓
3. Gathering and reviewing of evidence
↓
4. Assessment
↓
5. Accreditation
↓
6. Post assessment guidance

According to the consultants, the most informative project since the early studies is the *Access to Assessment Initiative*. However, a subsequent project to evaluate the success of the Initiative identified that the withdrawing of TEC funding for APL, combined with the process no longer enjoying a high profile, have resulted in a dwindling number of available APL programmes.

Some anecdotal evidence suggests that TECs are unaware of APL activity in colleges and training providers.

Those centres which had embedded APL as part of a wider framework of flexible learning had success with candidates. APL was not seen as a stand alone service.

Conclusions

The consultants specified a number of conclusions, but suggested that the key issue is not accreditation of prior learning as a source of evidence - instead emphasis should be on crediting current competence using all available sources of evidence. It is believed that in formally recognising a candidate's competence for a qualification, it is not important whether all or some of the evidence is of prior learning and achievements.

There is also a perception that APL has assumed a false importance at the expense of focusing on crediting current competence. Discussions have centred on the relative worth of sources of evidence, when they should be concerned with the quality of the evidence regardless of its source. In crediting current competence, evidence of prior learning and achievement must be judged like all other sources of evidence to ensure it is relevant, sufficient, current and authentic to the qualification which the candidate is seeking to achieve.

The view that APL is different and separate has resulted in evidence of prior learning and achievement being used less widely than anticipated. Assessors have taken steps to avoid this source of evidence or at least have become over-anxious about its inclusion in the overall evidence a candidate may have to offer.

If evidence of prior learning is available, it may be a cost-effective way of contributing to assessment. Where it is not, it may be more cost-effective and simpler to use other sources of evidence.

Recommendations

The consultants made number of recommendations which will not be acted upon until the report is published by DfEE.

Amongst the recommendations, some were aimed specifically at SQA, NCVQ and DfEE urging them to issue a policy statement clarifying the importance of crediting current competence. It was suggested that developing links between the National Record of Achievement (NRA) (shortly to be re-named) would promote the culture of recording achievement and the on-going crediting of competence.

In addition, the consultants advised that DfEE should be responsible for facilitating and supporting initiatives by Training Enterprise Councils (TECs) and Local Enterprise Councils (LECs) for crediting current competence amongst the existing workforce. For example, TECs could investigate setting up a network of organisations able to offer APL as part of NVQ assessment.

In partnership with awarding bodies of NVQs and SVQs, DfEE should produce guidance and case studies on attracting and retaining more experienced candidates who require an accelerated approach to assessment.

Centres offering NVQs and SVQs should also make sure candidates are aware of the opportunities to use evidence of prior learning and to help identify evidence where appropriate. However, the consultants recommend that such evidence should not be pursued if more suitable evidence is available. Part II - Evaluation explores these conclusions and recommendations in more depth.

2 The Accrediting Bodies

The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) are the two accrediting bodies in the United Kingdom for NVQs and SVQs respectively. Both organisations refer to Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) within guidance to Awarding Bodies.

Under one of SQA's predecessor bodies SCOTVEC, the document *Criteria and Guidance* (SCOTVEC February 1995) states that performance and knowledge evidence includes:

> "..... Evidence of prior achievement may be relevant as both performance evidence and knowledge. It should be accepted wherever it is clearly relevant to the national standard, is authenticated, and the candidate's competence can be confirmed as being current. Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is the term used in SVQs when candidates use evidence from past activities to gain credit for their competence. By giving credit for a candidate's competence, APL allows credit to be gained rapidly when appropriate and learning to be carefully targeted to individual needs.
>
> Awarding bodies should ensure that centres take full account of candidates' evidence of prior experience ....."

NVQs and SVQs based on standards of competence provide a firm starting point to be able to offer specific credit against stated outcomes of learning.

Two representatives from the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) were interviewed as part of this project. Like most other organisations, the Council has moved away from using any specific term to describe the process of recognising prior and informal learning. If deemed necessary, the terms used are the **accreditation of prior achievement (APA) or the accreditation of prior learning (APL).** The accreditation of prior learning is regarded as primarily the domain of working life and looks at experiences, skills and knowledge in a range of settings, whilst embracing informal learning and not simply the formal book experience.

APL - the early years

It was acknowledged that in developing APL, and particularly in the aftermath of the *Access to Assessment Initiative,* the focus was on the attractiveness of the model at the expense of other sources of evidence. This backfired as such initiatives gave the impression to employers that APL was about accrediting past experience and that any qualification achieved via this route was an exercise in rubber-stamping that which is already known or demonstrated so there is little point in getting a certificate to tell you this. Various publications were produced which promoted APL, including a leaflet and articles in the Council's quarterly magazine *The Monitor.*

APL - current status

Since the Access to Assessment Initiative, NCVQ's position has altered and now the key message is the need to encourage centres to look at what a candidate may have done in the past. In this way, past achievement and learning should be used as a starting point, the evidence considered and the assessor expected to acknowledge this source in the overall portfolio of evidence which a candidate may have to offer.

The existing NVQ and GNVQ Criteria documents (the former currently being revised) also incorporate information on the accreditation of prior achievement and provide the main guidance for awarding bodies. The relationship between the Council and the awarding bodies which offer NVQs is agreed in the form of contracts which reinforce a requirement for prior learning and achievement to be addressed. Through scrutiny and monitoring of awarding bodies' activities, information indicates that the process has been used with adults and those

requiring formal recognition as assessors within the NVQ system.

Like the findings of the DfEE report on a study to improve the practice of APL, NCVQ is aware of perceptions that APL is viewed as a short cut method and is thought to be applied less rigorously in assessment and certification. There is a concern that because a candidate has been doing a job for years, he/she will be deemed competent and can expect to be awarded a certificate. This suggests that the candidate's competence has not been properly evaluated against the standards.

The accrediting bodies would like to promote a positive message about the recognition of informal learning through APL - recognition of formal learning should not be at the expense of informal learning and where possible attempts should be made to raise the profile of skills, knowledge and experience through the APL process.

According to NCVQ, there is insufficient information on transferable skills - more on the conceptual level, but little in terms of hard research. There was a suggestion that where evidence is context specific, credit transfer and transferability may be difficult to achieve. There is a general need to raise the scope to transfer skills.

Like NCVQ, SQA does not require awarding bodies to list alternative routes, including APL, on a candidate's certificate. This makes it almost impossible to identify where candidates have had evidence of prior and informal learning recognised through the APL process. If the accrediting bodies do not require awarding bodies to collect this information and awarding bodies do not in turn collect this data from centres, statistical information on APL for NVQs and SVQs becomes largely anecdotal or collected through focused research projects akin to that commissioned by DfEE. In some respects, this reflects the growing trend to acknowledge where evidence of prior and informal learning may be available, but to ensure that APL is not at the expense of other sources of evidence.

A more formal evaluation of APL in NVQ and SVQs has been undertaken as part of the Beaumont Review of NVQs and SVQs.

The Beaumont Review

A review of the national framework of NVQs and SVQs was commissioned by the Government in 1994. The review of the top 100 NVQs and SVQs was chaired by Gordon Beaumont and became known as the Beaumont Review. Amongst its primary aims was the

need to encourage uptake of NVQs and SVQs by improving the credibility of the qualifications in the eyes of existing and potential users.

Core skills was another topic explored in the Beaumont Review. This issue was explored with candidates and employers, with the former reporting an increase in skills and the quality and flexibility of their work. There was a fairly mixed response from employers. Some employers remarked on the higher profile being conferred on core skills, whilst others were anxious to play down these skills stating that the objective is to make sure the product goes out on time. Most reluctance to core skills was expressed in the engineering sectors where it was felt core skills should be taught at school and attempts to introduce broader awards would be at the expense of sector specific skills.

In the utilities industry, employers reported they did not understand the need for core and transferable skills for the workforce.

Extensive research carried out as part of the Review produced some interesting statistical data and this has been included as quantitative indicators in Part II - Evaluation.

3 The Awarding Bodies

Awarding bodies who are key players in vocational education and training, covering a range of qualifications including a variety of occupational and general NVQs/SVQs, were contacted and invited to respond to a number of questions around current practice.

The awarding bodies City and Guilds, EDEXCEL, Scottish Qualifications Authority and RSA Examinations Board and were asked about the name given to the process of accrediting prior and informal learning as a starting point. The term **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)** was used by 3 of the awarding bodies with 2 of these also using the term **Accreditation of Prior Achievement (APA)** usually when referring to previously certificated learning. The fourth awarding body uses the term **Accreditation of Prior Achievement** only.

The Open University was also contacted in its role as an awarding body in the vocational education and training field. The terms used here are **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)** and **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)** which is in common with a number of players in the higher education field where informal learning is described in this way. The section on access further defines this.

All of the awarding bodies included references to APL,APA or APEL in their documentation for centres. The term APL will be used throughout this report to cover all of the above terms unless specified differently.

A summary of information obtained from the awarding bodies interviewed for the purposes of this work follows.

All awarding bodies are expected to include policies about APL within their guidance to centres. The centres approved by awarding bodies are generally the locus for the assessment and recommendation of certification for prior learning. Additional government support has been provided through the Department for Education and Employment, Scottish Enterprise, (TECs) and (LECs) through initiatives like the Access to Assessment Initiative (1991-1994).

Awarding Bodies operating within the framework of NVQs/SVQs and further education support the practice of accrediting prior learning by providing guidance. The details of how the process operates and the extent to which it operates is not easily identifiable from the Awarding Bodies since it is the centres which operate on behalf of the awarding bodies who undertake the work.

The principle of not differentiating on certificates how credit was gained was endorsed by all awarding bodies who were contacted. This means that there are no statistics collected routinely by awarding bodies about the use of the process of accrediting prior and informal learning.

Although some awarding bodies have specific documentation which relates to APL,APA or APEL this tended to have been published some time ago (often from around the time of the original work in this field -early 1990s). New guidance tends to be incorporated into general guidance about delivery, assessment and quality. This could be guidance issued to centres at the stage of initial approval or additional guidance issued to awarding body staff, such as external verifiers to help them implement policies.

The common approach of the awarding bodies is to view the process as being integral to the assessment process. As such feedback to the awarding bodies on the use of APL within centres tends to be informal through ongoing contact with awarding body staff rather than through any published data.

Whilst centres are encouraged to use APL wherever possible within programmes or courses the awarding bodies contacted did not collect quantifiable statistics. APL could occur for different parts of a programme - either small or large.

Awarding bodies work on the principle that evidence from prior and informal learning is part of an overall package. Evidence from this source still has to be judged against the standards and meet the evidence requirements of the award being claimed in the same way as evidence from other sources. The principles of the evidence being :

- sufficient
- authentic
- valid

apply along with the individual demonstrating current competence of what is being claimed.

Quality assurance procedures for sampling and documentation of evidence apply for prior and informal learning in the same way as other evidence. Results are not differentiated for certification purposes.

In relation to how satisfactory the process of including prior and informal learning is in use - issues about practicability were mentioned. The process is an individual process. More than one awarding body indicated that staff in centres perceived APL a long and time consuming process and are anxious about using evidence from this source as the main or only source. They may therefore disregard it in practice. Centres therefore tend to focus on current evidence especially within the NVQ/SVQ context.

The process therefore is more likely to be seen as feasible in employer environments especially where a number of individuals have similar experiences which have the potential to be matched into the established standards of an award.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that the care sector, including nurse education, used APL to a greater extent that other areas, possibly because of an established individualised/candidate-centred approach which is required for APL.

One awarding body has a Diploma for Community Groups (this award is outside the occupational NVQ/SVQ system). The courses or programmes focus particularly on voluntary work providing a source of evidence. However it was reported that issues still arose around the

context of evidence which might not match the breadth or provide experience for the level of competence to be demonstrated.

One awarding body was developing and implementing specific guidance for candidates in the occupational sector concerned with Broadcast, Film and Video. This specific occupational/sector guidance is seen as a positive way to provide support in the accreditation of prior and informal learning. This process involved external verifiers working with centres and others in the occupational area to develop support materials.

Other awarding bodies were not able to be specific about sectors using APL.

One awarding body thought that there was an issue around APL being used as a marketing tool to suggest a 'fast track' to certification which did not happen in practice.

External verifiers employed by the awarding bodies were seen as playing a key role. They deal with support to centre staff and confirm judgements about the assessment of evidence derived from prior and informal learning. Sampling would be expected to cover this aspect.

Awarding bodies reported that they include training for external verifiers about APL either directly or through published guidance. They were generally confident about them providing advice and verifying in this context. One awarding body thought that there was a need for external verifiers to promote and support the use of prior and informal learning to a greater extent. Several awarding bodies indicated that external verifiers, like centre staff, might also be cautious in relation to the evidence acceptable in order to satisfy the four basic requirements of validity, authenticity, sufficiency and currency of competence within the claim.

Whilst awarding bodies mention that it might be helpful to provide specific guidance about APL, such as examples of evidence, this was not a strongly held view since integration with more general guidance was seen as more important. The view of awarding bodies is generally one of looking holistically at APL as part of the assessment process.

The description of APL as source of evidence not an assessment method is key to the whole subject. A useful reference here is from *NVQ Assessment: A Handbook for the Paperless Portfolio* by Shirley Fletcher produced for NCVQ 1997. This put in context the views of awarding bodies that evidence must meet the predetermined standards irrespective of the source. The reality for many vocational programmes is that prior certificated or experiential learning provides supplementary evidence (rather than the main evidence).

Evaluation of the process of accrediting prior and informal learning was not seen as a formal activity for awarding bodies.

The National Record of Achievement (NRA)

The National Record of Achievement summarises the achievements and experiences of the person to whom it belongs, both in education and throughout life. The NRA is an individual development portfolio and should not be regarded as a piece of assessment evidence.

The NRA has recently been evaluated and as a consequence, it has been recommended that the document be renamed *Progress File (Pro'File).* This new name is currently being market tested along with a pilot of a revised format and content. There is some concern in Scotland about the potential confusion which the new name may attract given other initiatives referring to the term *profile*. For example, SQA will generate an electronic Core Skills profile for every school pupil in Scotland.

For the purposes of this report, we will continue to refer to the existing title NRA, pending confirmation of the proposed name.

Current status

The DfEE report on APL and the UCAS survey both report that the NRA does not enjoy widespread support amongst employers. This is attributed to a lack of awareness about the purpose and content of the document amongst this group. At the moment, employers do not regard the NRA as particularly helpful for planning training - they either don't think of using it, or have received insufficient guidance on how it can be used in this way.

Access and Higher Education

One of the main areas where prior and informal learning is acknowledged within Higher Education is in relation to access into established programmes of degrees, post graduate and professional qualifications.

There are comprehensive sets of policies throughout the United Kingdom which provide briefing and examples of practice for those within Higher Education.

A recent publication 'Accreditation of Prior Learning - Briefing for Higher Education' published in July 1996 by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) provides a comprehensive explanation of the process of the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), how it is currently used (based on a survey of Higher Education institutions within the United Kingdom) and illustrates this with several case studies of the type of credit awarded.

The Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is defined as the generic term used for the recognition and an award of credit on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred at some time in the past.

The purposes of APL, as an entry route to Higher Education, are described as:

- entry into a course or programme
- advanced standing on a course or programme
- credit against some of the outcomes of a course or programme that will count towards an award.

The assessment and accreditation of prior learning encompasses two main types:

- certificated learning (APCL)
- uncertificated or experiential learning (APEL)

These are defined as follows:

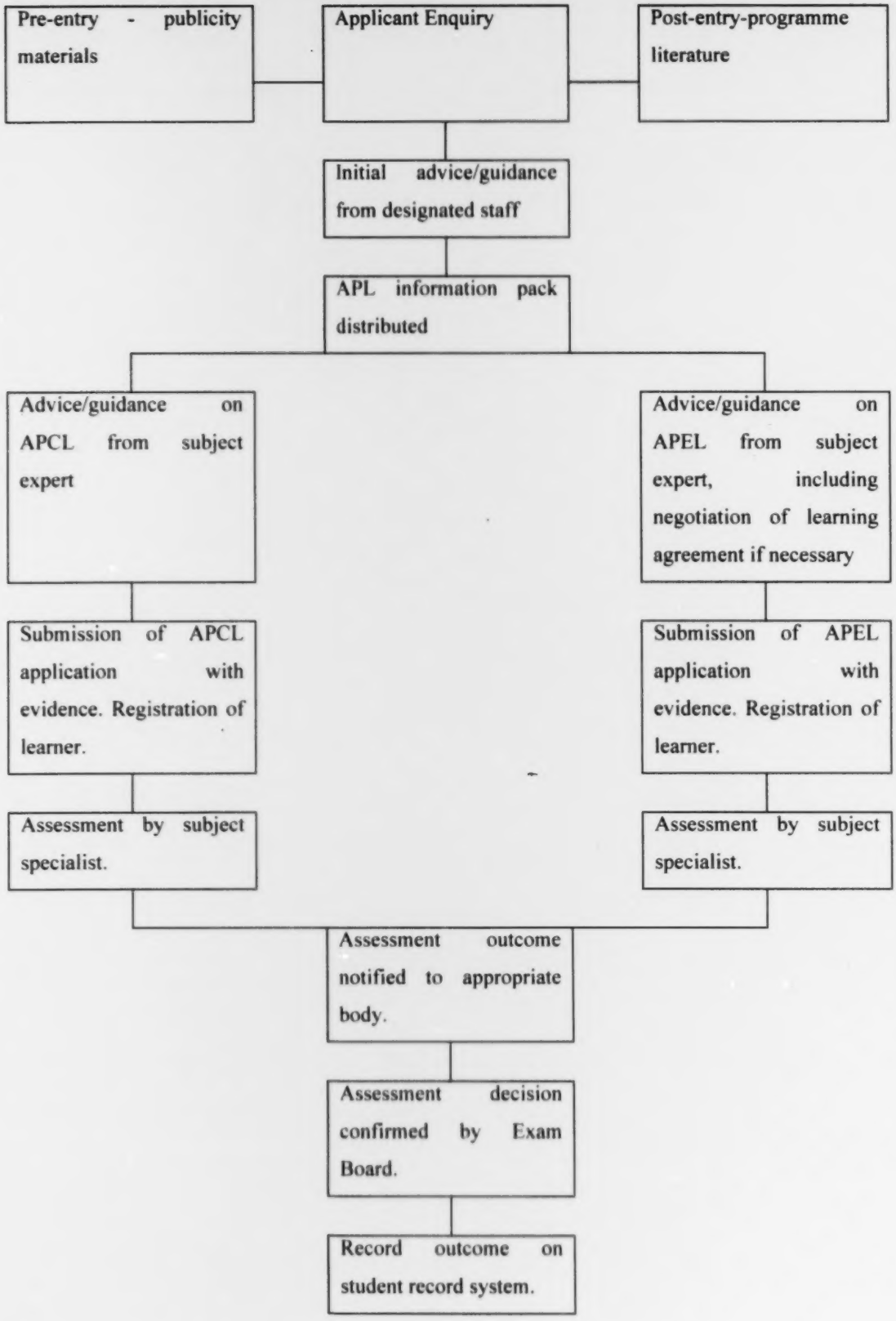
- APCL - the accreditation of prior certificated learning (learning for which certification has been awarded by an educational institution or another education/training provider)

- APEL - the accreditation of prior experiential learning (this refers to uncertificated learning gained from experience. APEL is sometimes referred to as RPEL-the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning).

A model for the award of credit on the basis of prior learning

This flowchart represents a synthesis of a range of models in operation in various Higher Education institutions. It demonstrates only the formal procedures within the institution, and assumes that additional guidance and support are available for learners whose claims are not immediately deemed worthy of credit, or who are using APL as part of a negotiated programme towards an award, which will include other means of gaining credit. These additional mechanisms are not represented on the chart.

The following page contains an extract from UCAS 97: *Accreditation of Prior Learning - Briefing for Higher Education 1996*. This model demonstrates how the APL process is often handled by formal procedures within institutions.


Pre-entry - publicity materials
Applicant Enquiry
Post-entry-programme literature
Initial advice/guidance from designated staff
APL information pack distributed
Advice/guidance on APCL from subject expert
Advice/guidance on APEL from subject expert, including negotiation of learning agreement if necessary
Submission of APCL application with evidence. Registration of learner.
Submission of APEL application with evidence. Registration of learner.
Assessment by subject specialist.
Assessment by subject specialist.
Assessment outcome notified to appropriate body.
Assessment decision confirmed by Exam Board.
Record outcome on student record system.

The UCAS survey indicated a wide range of practices with some universities operating a framework for accrediting prior learning centrally with others devolving implementation of their framework to departments and faculties. Some universities at that time were without a formal framework.

The use of APL for advanced standing - direct entry into a programme at a point beyond the normal starting point - and for initial entry, where individuals do not have formal entry qualifications, was evident. This process does not necessarily lead to certification - where certification would only be awarded when the complete programme has been achieved.

The results of the APL process vary from exemption from parts of a programme or course to awarding general credit or specific credit matched against outcomes of an identified award. Specific credit was recognised as being of greater value to the individual. This competence-led definition of credit is one that the Higher Educational Quality Council stated a commitment to (ref: Choosing to change - extending access, choice and mobility in higher education - Report of the HEQC CAT Development Project 1994). This work was part of a consultative process to investigate ways in which the more wide spread development of credit-based learning could be encouraged. Credit-based systems of learning were seen as playing a major role in increasing flexibility of provision thus widening access and a higher level of student aspiration and achievement.

Institutions in the Higher and Further Education sector have their own frameworks but are likely to relate to the quality assurance frameworks of awarding bodies and the guidelines of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). Guidelines on Quality Assurance of Credit-Based Learning produced by the HEQC 1994 provide a benchmark for the Higher Education sector.

The HEQC promotes the national policy for higher education which includes that of increased flexibility of provision, widening access and a higher level of student aspiration and achievements. Credit-based systems of learning are seen as having a major role in achieving this objective.

A national credit framework was seen as a way of promoting credit for learning wherever acquired. This would facilitate the transfer of credit for learning between faculties, institutions and different sectors of education. Many universities and colleges (approximately 85% at time of report), in higher education, had or planned to introduce a scheme for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT).

Throughout the United Kingdom CAT schemes exist, often organised in a consortia on a regional basis. Two examples are South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) which has over 25% of England's universities and colleges funded by the Higher Education Funding Council, and the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (SCOTCAT) which includes all higher education institutions in Scotland. These and other consortia provide guidelines and examples of good practice.

The SCOTCAT framework is described in the publication - Quality in Admissions - A handbook for Academic Admissions Tutors in Scottish Higher Education Institutions(1995). This guide focuses like a number of CAT schemes on certificated and prior formal learning. The commonly used term in these schemes is 'credit transfer'.

The underpinning principle of APL in the context of access, as indeed in most other contexts in the United Kingdom is that credit is given for **learning** and not for experience alone. The credit which is awarded should not be valued differently from that gained through more traditional routes. One of the results of this is that it can be difficult to identify the extent to which APL is used within programmes or courses.

Recent work funded in Scotland by SHEFC (Scottish Higher Education Funding Council) resulted in Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning - a manual for good practice in Higher Education (Fiona Reeve and Iain Smith 1996) which was aimed at those involved in the process of accrediting prior and informal learning. The focus is on prior experiential learning not previously formally assessed. The handbook draws on procedures of four universities in the West of Scotland and provides examples of different contexts where APEL has been used.

The methodologies related to APL within Higher Education in the context of access have been derived from nationally recognised principles published in guidelines by HEQC and similar centrally based organisations. Systems are then devised and implemented by individual institutions using this guidance and that produced by other organisations such as UCAS and other project based work. Much of the gathering of evidence tends to be based on portfolio or assigned project work. The process of accrediting prior and informal learning is largely an individual process with guidance provided by the institution.

Although some of the work in Higher Education links into the UK NVQ/SVQ system, most is related to accessing qualifications awarded by the Higher Education institutions themselves. There appears to be less use of APL in conjunction with professional bodies in this sector. The

areas where it does operate tend to be limited to specific bodies. Difficulties cited are that professional bodies have a view of APL which is not consistent with the Higher Education institution awarding the credit and that in many cases there is resistance to the idea.

Data is not generally gathered on the numbers who use APL within their programme. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the figures would be small relative to the numbers undergoing courses or programmes of learning.

PART II - EVALUATION OF APL

Recent publications on the process of APL have included information on its current status. This information has been gathered using various methods such as interviews - face to face and telephone - questionnaires and desk research of publications on the topic of APL.

This analysis has allowed the authors to reach conclusions on current practice, and in some instances make recommendations on how to improve the operation of APL. Increasingly, case studies on best practice are being included in publications and some attempt has been made to address cost which is a key issue in the discussion about APL.

This part of the report will begin by focusing on the evaluation of APL/APEL practice in the Higher Education sector. Later in the text, attention will turn to the operation of APL in competence-based assessment in the workplace, specifically NVQs and SVQs.

We have attempted to classify the findings under common sub-headings, but it would be prudent not to overlook the conceptual differences to APL as it is applied in the two sectors.The sub-headings relate to:

- implementation of APL
- costs
- age of students/candidates
- barriers to uptake
- support for students/candidates
- quality assurance of APL
- case studies on best practice
- marketing and awareness raising

Implementation

Within Higher Education, the term *validation* is often referred to in publications but is not used in the same sense as the CEDEFOP tender. The term validation is usually linked to courses and programmes of study and not to individual learning in the United Kingdom. For example, in the case of SQA, validation relates to a process of approving the content of qualifications according to set criteria.

The UCAS publication includes useful information on implementation obtained through a survey of all universities using the admissions clearing system. A total of thirty-seven universities responded to the questionnaire.

When asked about the extent to which APL/APEL has been used in universities, twenty-five of the responses indicated that the process is used for initial access to a course **and** for advanced standing whereby students are able to join the programme at a stage beyond the initial starting point, for example into Year 2 of a course. In addition, universities have admitted adult returners without the standard entry qualifications on the grounds of other certificated learning or on the basis of portfolios of experiential learning. In order to join a course at a stage beyond the initial starting point, however, students must be in possession of an appropriate HE-type award, such as an HND. Some additional individual comments on this aspect of the questionnaire attempt to quantify the extent to which students are successful in using the APL/APEL process. For example, one HEI had admitted 50 students using APEL within an 18 months timespan and another university indicated that of 18 students without full formal entry qualifications, only 2 were admitted totally on the basis of APEL in 1995.

The use of APL within Higher Education was also found to be most popular within the new universities offering vocational programmes.

In terms of courses where the APL process is most commonly used, the HEIs indicated that is was particularly popular for part-time, vocational courses and for sectors such as:

> Nursing and Health studies, Engineering, Teacher Training, Professional and Continuing Education, Law, Arts and Science Faculties.

Cost of APL

The UCAS publication on APL indicates that where institutions are faced with a claim based on prior certificated learning, it is common practice not to charge for this.

However, where claims involve uncertificated prior experiential learning (APEL), various charging structures are adopted. This is because institutions may be targeting particular groups of students or they are keen to adopt the APL process. In terms of direct costs, the UCAS survey identified a spectrum which ranged from individual faculties setting charges, charges per module or award, a straightforward flat rate, or a charge for counselling fees most typically in relation to portfolio building.

Age

Of the thirty-seven responses, sixteen HEIs indicated that the over twenty-one upwards is the typical age range for students wishing to use APL/APEL. Fourteen responded with twenty-five years old and upwards.

Barriers to uptake

Like NVQs and SVQs, the cost of implementing APL may be prohibitive to students. In addition, the literature would appear to suggest that those students with portfolios of experiential learning will find the process of gaining access less straightforward than those with certificated learning.

The UCAS survey also enquired about how much credit HEIs are prepared to award on the basis of APL/APEL. The responses varied according to each HEI; some awarded two-thirds of a degree, other awarded exemption form the first year only and one institution went so far as to stipulate credit according to a range of awards at different levels.

The issue of access is further explored in an article in the *Quality in Admissions* handbook written by Stephanie Young of ASCETT on Education and Training Targets for Scotland. The article states that universities could create further opportunities to encourage access to Higher Education by investing more time upfront with non-traditional students and investigating the scope to match the applicant with a mentor. Accurate records should also be kept of progress, reasons for success and failure and how the HEIs respond to these findings. In this way, barriers to access may be overcome for non-traditional applicants to HE.

Support

According to the UCAS survey, many HEIs offer a specific module on how to present evidence of experiential learning as part of portfolio production.

Other support services include one to one counselling sessions, workshops aimed at helping students to develop claims, adhoc advice within the faculty, mentoring or other modules aimed at helping students with guidance on preparing APEL portfolios.

Quality Assurance

This report has already touched on quality assurance arrangements for HE, but in addition the UCAS survey stated that few HEIs perceived APL as solely an internal process. Many institutions have external examiners on the board of examiners or referred internal decisions on APL to the board for ratification.

Case studies on best practice

Case studies on best practice are widely regarded as an appropriate way to demonstrate how APL/APEL can be made available to applicants.

The UCAS publication offered five case studies, suggesting how certificated learning can be combined with experiential learning to give access or advanced standing to HE courses.

Marketing and awareness raising

Publications on APL/APEL aimed at admissions tutors do help to raise awareness of the process. Individual institutions promote the process to students through university handbooks, leaflets, responses to enquiries from students, interviews, guides aimed at mature students and through the university summer programme.

Success of APL/APEL in Higher Education

This section of the report has reviewed the use of APL/APEL amongst HEIs. Some quantitative indicators on APL/APEL have been included, but it would be worth noting that without the UCAS survey, there would be little information on how these processes are used in practice.

The UCAS survey demonstrates Higher Education's commitment to referring to previous learning and experience as a means of obtaining access or advance standing into higher education courses. In particular, HEIs were attracted to the increased scope to introduce more mature and non-traditional students to higher education and which in the view of one university, makes for a more motivated and diverse student population.

Most universities were optimistic in future developments for APL/APEL with plans to widen their use in higher education courses or produce more precise guidelines on how to deal with non-traditional applications.

However, the evidence suggests that APL (certificated learning) enjoys more success than APEL (experiential learning) with universities appearing less cautious in their approach to certificated learning than experiential learning. There may be several reasons why this is the case, not least that the more traditional universities are only now starting to consider experience and learning achieved through vocational qualifications as suitable indicators of a student's abilities. Other reasons undermining the success of APL could relate to cost. Most universities indicated that claims based on APL were processed at no cost, whereas APEL claims incurred a variety of charges which may present barriers to access for students with little financial means.

The survey revealed how some universities are uncomfortable in dealing with more complex and time-consuming claims by applicants based on experiential learning. Whilst there are universities prepared for this type of claim, there are others which take an adhoc faculty approach to APEL or where students would normally receive some sort of counselling.

Implementation

Accreditation in NVQ and SVQ terms does not relate to access as in HE, but instead is used to facilitate certification for prior and informal learning whether previously certificated or not.

This represents an interesting dichotomy between the use of APL for the purposes of national certification where there is an onus to ensure that the evidence is valid and reliable versus entry/access to a course in FE or HE where it may be down to a matter of trust between the tutor and the student. There may be more added value in using APL for access to courses offered by HE or FE

as opposed to seeking national certification when its use could be regarded as attracting a greater element of risk.

The recent DfEE project on how to improve the practice of APL revealed there are difficulties with perceptions and definitions of APL. Whilst these definitions have included references to evidence of prior achievement and learning and past evidence, these terms are not consistent with crediting current competence. For example, some respondents believed evidence gathered from doing skills tests on knowledge acquired in the past and demonstrated in the present would not be considered a source of evidence for APL.

The project also found that the label APL is unnecessary and off-putting to employers. This view was apparent amongst the employers questioned on the use of APL. The consultants concluded that there is a misconception amongst employers about how evidence from the past does not demonstrate current competence. This would seem to challenge the notion of how evidence from the past gives an indication of transferable skills. As a result, organisations such as awarding bodies are beginning to drop references to this term in literature.

The consultants also believe there is still an impression about APL being more useful to paper based and higher level qualifications than to manual or lower levels qualifications - though two cases of the latter category were identified. The consultants maintained that the individualised nature of evidence makes it difficult to come to any conclusions about the most suitable source of evidence.

NCVQ also evaluates the process of accrediting prior and informal learning through an Advisory Forum for Access to Fair Assessment which involves awarding bodies along with others. An example of an area examined has been that of access to GNVQs on a part time basis.

No definitive information was available about which sectors made most use of APA. Anecdotal evidence suggested that keys skills - those which are transferable between contexts - could be measured using evidence from many settings including non work. APA of this type would probably be used for access into a programme.

The main issues identified through interviews with representatives of NCVQ were:

- APA not always offered to individuals
- level of support for APA candidates not enough
- success or otherwise in accessing the APA process often dependent on first point of contact at a centre
- Many potential users not aware of processes of competence-based information and therefore not thinking of gathering evidence as a means of gaining credit

Cost of APL

The issue of cost attracts a great deal of interest in the debate about APL. Within vocational education and training, costs can vary according to the array of services which this process appears to attract and can be made more difficult to identify given the impression that APL is a very individualised process.

The recent project on APL carried out by the DfEE probably gives the most comprehensive account of the costs likely to be accrued in this process. The consultants acknowledge that the individual characteristics of the candidate can play a large part in determining the costs of APL. For example, where evidence is readily available and a candidate is able to seek information and endorsements from employers, the process of APL is considered to be more cost-effective.If a candidate is not able to supply information with this such ease, the process can be frustrating and costly with little to show for the candidate's efforts.This is why it is suggested that other more appropriate methods to assess a candidate's competence should be investigated.

The report does include information on direct costs, but the consultants suggest that centres offering APL services do not determine these costs in any systematic way and this largely

results in estimates. Amongst the information on direct costs, the consultants were able to identify one TEC in Humberside which was also included as a case study on best practice in APL. This TEC estimated that costs can vary from as little as £275 to £540 depending on the NVQ which the candidate is seeking to achieve via the APL route.

These views were endorsed by the results of the telephone interviews with representatives of awarding bodies. Representatives were reluctant to comment on the costs of APL, suggesting that the cost of delivering training and assessment is at the discretion of centres. It was recognised, however, that cost can be a barrier to achieving an NVQ/SVQ, but this also applies to the wider implementation of these qualifications and not just to those candidates using the APL route.

Age

Of the 3,000 candidates questioned during the Beaumont Review, 49% said they were not asked about any evidence they might have from their past. This figure is at odds with assessors and internal verifiers of whom 65% said they have referred to this source of evidence and believed it to be a cost effective way of assessing candidates.

When candidates were asked what they perceived to be the most appropriate method of generating evidence, out of a possible choice of six methods, APL was ranked bottom of the list by 30% of the candidates. As might be expected, APL became more important to older candidates with more experience. This would suggest a relationship between age, experience and APL. For example, of the 49% of candidates who said they had not been asked about APL, only 44% of 16 - 20 year olds thought it would be useful compared to 63% of the over 55 year old bracket. It was also ranked higher amongst employed candidates and given a lower ranking amongst unemployed or part-time students. Lowest of all was full-time students.
There would appear to be more success with APL in the engineering, energy and agricultural sectors than in those sectors requiring softer skills. Assessors also indicated that APL was more appropriate and cost-effective at higher level NVQs\SVQs. This could also be a reflection of skill, experience and age.

Barriers to uptake

- Awareness

  Organisations such as awarding bodies and TECs and LECs do appear to have awareness of APL and it is presumed therefore that lack of awareness does not present a barrier to access or uptake.

- Difficulties with evidence collection

  There is a perception in the field that evidence of prior learning is time consuming and difficult to collect. The consultants suggested this could be attributed to the process being seen as paper based and this is unlikely to be the only source of evidence for SVQs and NVQs.

  Most centres encourage candidates to use portfolios to present their evidence of APL, but the findings of the Beaumont Review revealed that some candidates experienced difficulties with this method. For example, in some sectors like Distribution, candidates with a low level of literacy skills found it difficult to put together a portfolio. The volume of paperwork and the writing up and collecting of evidence were viewed as barriers to access.

  This means assessors using the APL process should investigate other ways of collecting and presenting evidence which may be more suited to the candidate.

- Distinction between sources of evidence

  There would also appear to be an artificial distinction between evidence of prior learning and other sources of evidence. It is suggested that evidence from prior learning therefore requires a different approach by assessors and internal verifiers. In turn, it is believed this may have led to evidence of prior learning not being presented for consideration towards achieving a qualification. Detailed guidance on the use of evidence of prior learning may help to address this imbalance.

Support

Like HE, the consultants noted a need to review the level of support which candidates receive on APL. There is a particular unit which is described as appropriate for APL advisers - *D36 Advise and support candidates to identify prior achievement*. The consultants suggest, however, it would be more meaningful to produce a unit on how a mentor should support a candidate through the NVQ/SVQ assessment process and not simply focus on APL.

In addition, further research should be undertaken to provide appropriate support mechanisms for adult learners and to establish which organisations should be responsible for providing this support.

Quality Assurance

Key issues surrounding the accreditation of prior learning relate to the currency and authenticity of evidence. According to the consultants, there is no indication that poor quality evidence is being accepted.

There are, however, indications that assessors are nervous about looking at evidence of prior learning because of perceived problems about poor quality evidence. There is a possibility that this is giving rise to over-assessment and a *better safe than sorry* approach by assessors.

The report on the findings of the Beaumont Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs concluded that APL does not seem to be valued and that many colleges had difficulty incorporating APL into their assessment regimes. It was considered easier to begin with new evidence than to consider evidence produced from the candidate's previous learning. The report goes on to say that some awarding bodies discourage the use of APL because of concerns about the quality of the evidence and the extent to which it can demonstrate current competence. The Care sector was regarded as giving least encouragement to using APL.

Case Studies on best practice

Recent publications on APL have included case studies on best practice as part of their evaluation.

In the DfEE report, a series of interviews with organisations implementing NVQs and SVQs revealed that many of the lead bodies responsible for setting the standards of these

qualifications were unable to provide information on APL. It was also apparent that awarding bodies either had no information on APL or felt it was embedded in existing literature.

This lack of information on APL prompted the consultants to include more case study material than was originally intended in the report to the Department for Education and Employment in an attempt to improve the operation of APL.

There are ten case studies plus a reference to an initiative aimed at the construction industry, included in the report to DfEE. These case studies cover a broad range of occupational areas and types of organisations offering NVQs/SVQs. To some extent, the studies reflect the consultants' recommendations on how to improve the practice of APL. For example, there is a case study on how to market the process, another on how to accredit the skills of voluntary workers and one example of how an Awarding Body attempts to facilitate the process by providing dedicated paperwork to record past experience.

These case studies reflect recommendations to DfEE that it should work in partnership with awarding bodies of NVQs and SVQs to provide more sector specific case studies. Key to the success of these case studies is the need to present them in plain English to ensure a wider audience is aware of how different types of evidence can be used towards obtaining qualifications.

Marketing and awareness raising

The need to market the concept of APL is identified as requiring further consideration. This is also related to another recommendation by the consultants that the label APL be dropped.

The consultants suggest that any future marketing campaigns will have to increase the uptake of qualifications by emphasising the flexibility of assessment with various routes to achieving NVQs and SVQs.

The production of sector specific case studies would also go some way to raising awareness about APL.

Success of APL in NVQs and SVQs

This section of the report on NVQs and SVQs has included quantitative indicators identified through sources such as the Beaumont Review and the recent DfEE report on how to improve APL in practice. Like information on APL/APEL in higher education, there would have been little to reflect on had the Review and DfEE research project not been undertaken.

Both reports reveal how the perceptions of NVQ/SVQ candidates can be at odds with assessors for these qualifications.

APL would appear to enjoy more success amongst more mature candidates employed in particular sectors. This would seem understandable, given the increased opportunity for such candidates to present evidence of prior and informal learning from sources other than certificated learning.

The investigation carried out by consultants on behalf of DfEE made a number of conclusions about APL in practice.

Increasingly, awarding bodies and accrediting bodies view APL as simply another source of evidence about a candidate's current competence. This is demonstrated by a gradual review of policy since the outcome of the Access to Assessment initiative which raised the status of APL at the expense of other sources of evidence. Accrediting and awarding bodies are looking to reverse this trend and whilst they are anxious to ensure that evidence from prior learning is considered, it should be viewed as part of the overall package of evidence which a candidate may bring to the assessment process.

The DfEE reports shows that where awarding bodies do not actively seek information on the use of APL, data on APL becomes difficult to identify. Not only are policies of awarding and accrediting bodies on APL changing, but there is little or no attempt by awarding bodies to collect statistical information on its use. This is not intended as a criticism, it is simply a reflection of current attitudes to APL.

There is little information on the cost of APL. It may be that the actual cost of using evidence of prior learning and achievement is hidden amongst other costs arising from counselling or mentoring services offered to candidates, particularly in relation to portfolio building.

The purpose of the DfEE report was to improve APL in practice and a number of recommendations have been defined which reflect the scope of the project. One of the key recommendations is a proposal to drop the label APL as it only creates unnecessary jargon. In the event of future research on the accreditation of prior and informal learning in the UK, this is one issue which must be acknowledged should the recommendation be adopted for NVQs and SVQs.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this project has been to update CEDEFOP on current practice in the accreditation of prior and informal learning in the United Kingdom.

The project describes how prior and informal learning is being used in the accreditation of unpaid work by developing links to National Vocational Qualifications and Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

Increasingly, accrediting and awarding bodies for NVQs and SVQs are encouraging assessors to acknowledge evidence of prior learning and achievement as part of the overall package of evidence which a candidate may bring to the assessment of NVQs and SVQs. This view is portrayed in the as yet unpublished report commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment on a study on how to improve the practice of APL. One key recommendation was the suggestion to avoid using the label APL as this is perceived as unnecessary jargon and is particularly off-putting to employers.

Interviews with representatives from accrediting and awarding bodies for NVQs and SVQs reinforced the findings of the research project initiated by DfEE.

Within Higher Education, a survey amongst Higher Education institutions reveals the extent to which this sector makes a distinction between the accreditation of prior learning (APL - certificated learning) and the accreditation of experiential learning (APEL - experiential learning). The two approaches have enjoyed mixed fortunes, with HEIs finding certificated learning more straightforward as a basis on which to award credit than experiential learning. To some extent, this is also reflected in the variety of fee structures which are adopted by universities for APL and APEL. Most universities do not charge a fee where applications are based on APL. However, most HEIs seem committed to the recognition of APEL in future developments.

Whilst this project has carried out an evaluation of APL in practice, the evaluation is largely based on desk research of existing literature. Some common themes have been identified in the form of sub-headings, but care should be taken in drawing comparisons between APL/APEL in Higher Education and NVQs and SVQs where there are conceptual differences in the use of APL.

These sub-headings relate to issues such as cost, barriers to access, marketing and awareness-raising. Where possible, reference has been made to the presentation of case studies or mini-projects which illustrate APL in practice. The inclusion of case studies in recent material is considered a suitable vehicle by which to promote best practice.

There has been a recent flurry of activity on APL in the UK with various organisations taking a fresh look at the accreditation of prior and informal learning in practice. This activity has resulted in published and unpublished material which hints at a changing emphasis on APL amongst universities and users of NVQs and SVQs. In future, attempts to identify the use of APL in NVQs and SVQs may be less straightforward with recent moves to embed evidence of the prior and informal learning in the assessment process. It is not that there is any reluctance to recognise this source of evidence for the purpose of accreditation, it is simply the need to address a growing concern that emphasis on APL is at the expense of other sources of evidence. In this respect, APL has moved on since the *Access to Assessment initiative* of 1991.

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CEDEFOP — European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Identification, validation and accreditation of prior and informal learning
United Kingdom report

The Scottish Qualifications Authority

CEDEFOP panorama

Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

1998 — XI, 40 pp. — 21 x 29.7 cm

ISBN 92-828-2526-4

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This report, focusing on the United Kingdom, is one of several contributions to the CEDEFOP project on assessment of prior and non-formal learning. The project was started in 1997, and will be concluded in 1998. The purpose of the project is to provide a comprehensive overview of the development in this area within the European Union (and the EEA countries).

In most cases, the methods and systems aiming at the assessment of non-formal skills have been operational for a comparatively short period of time. In some countries, no permanent methodologies and systems have been established, thus opening up the possibility of a variety of solutions in the years to come. This is very much the case on the European Union level, where the idea of a European personal skills card was introduced in the White Paper on teaching and learning (1995). We hope that the conclusions from the different reports will be of some relevance both to the European and to the national debates on the topic. In order to ensure this relevance, all contributors to the project have been asked to focus on the following questions:

(i) To what degree can methodologies for the assessment of non-formal learning be ascertained as valid and reliable? In other words, do they measure what they are supposed to measure, and is the quality of the assessment approach sufficient?

(ii) To what extent are assessments accepted — by individuals, by enterprises and by the labour market? In other words, what type of legitimate basis are current (and future) systems 'resting' on?

By asking these questions, we are attempting to stimulate research and debate on the effects of current initiatives, advancing from theoretical assumptions on the potential of methodologies and systems to a factual comprehension of the problems and principles being challenged.

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ISBN 92-828-2526-4

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National report